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ABSTRACT

Parents are young children's greatest resource, and quality parenting helps develop children's self-esteem. Every child needs caring parents to be teachers as well as nurturers. Parents can create learning experiences for their children in everyday activities, such as cooking, cleaning, and grocery shopping. In addition to teaching, parents should learn discipline techniques to help raise responsible and cooperative children without instilling fear and anger against parental power. Positive discipline techniques include: (1) making sure children really know the household rules; (2) respecting children as people; (3) offering appropriate incentives; (4) using empathic listening; (5) encouraging excellence, not perfection; (6) helping children consider the consequences of their actions; and (7) challenging children to think of alternatives to fighting. Parent involvement must become a high priority goal in improving children's lives and learning careers. (MM)

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PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE EARLY YEARS[1]

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Parents are young children's most precious resource. No other caregiver and no materials resources can take the place of parents who genuinely treasure their children and are deeply committed to nourish their children's growth and development. After their needs for food and comforting, for protection from distress and from danger are taken care of, young children most need a special person whom they know in their deepest self is their loving protector,teacher, and friend. This fundamental security base, this unpaid worker who puts in countless overtime hours without pay and often without much recognition from society, is a PARENT.

PARENTS BUILD SELF ESTEEM

A parent committed to a children's secure well-being is a person every society should honor or cherish.There could not be enough "awards" or medals for genuinely caring parents. They permit hope that the fabric of society will not be rent with violence, alienation, school dropouts, suicides, drug abuse, and other tragic attempts by youngsters to deaden their personal pain. Quality parenting is the secret indispensable ingredient to provide the inner core of self love and self esteem that sustains each growing child and gives courage to cope with problems so that the child can both lead a productive personal life as well as contribute to society (Honig,1982a). Parents are the mirror wherein young children find their inner true selves reflected as either essentially lovable or sadly unworthy (Briggs,1975).

Just giving birth to a child is not the same as parenting. Bettleheim (1987), the wise psychiatrist, reminds us, however, that young children do not need perfect

parents to thrive. They will do very well a "good enough parent". There is no "How-to" book that works for every child in every life situation. Parents with profound good will for their children will remember that cherishing does not mean smothering. They will understand that wanting a child to do well cannot be forced but must be supported. They will be aware emotionally that a **dependent** young child needs to grow up to become **independent** and separate from the parents. Children do not have the same temperament or wishes or abilities as the parent. Children need parents who provide for them as the parents in the fairy tale of the Three Bears, where the porridge was not too hot and not too cold, but just right! That is, too much enmeshment or too much isolation emotionally will wither the souls of young children.

What a strange job parenting is! We cherish and protect, worry over sniffles, blow noses, tie shoelaces, help with homework, patiently teach moral values and courtesies toward others (Lickona, 1983). Yet we do the job of parenting so that children can grow up to make their own choices and be able to live calmly on their own without parental help. If the job of parenting is done well, it is done so that parents work themselves OUT of a job!

Parenting requirements change with children's ages and stages. Parents who are perceptive will note when to drop the baby talk that so delighted the 10 month old and encouraged her to try words. Now they will use clearly pronounced adult words like "water" rather than "wa- wa" with their toddler whose vocabulary is growing by leaps and bounds. Parents who are perceptive will note that the five year

old can feed and dress herself rather well now and can even be allowed to choose clothes to lay out the night before going to kindergarten. Parents will note that a toddler expresses fierce independence about what he wants, how much he wants and how he wants it right away. But, they will also note that a No-saying defiant toddler who tries adult patience in the household still needs his thumb or pacifier and definitely needs the reassurance of his parent's lap when tired, crabby, or coming down with a cold.

The mystery of growth and development is not steady or predictable. Children differ in their threshold of tolerance for distress. They differ in whether they approach or avoid the NEW. They may be impulsive or quietly reflective. Some are very active, always on the go. Others are quieter. Perceptive parents do not lump all children together. They notice the small differences in mood, in shyness or worrying, in adaptability or rigidity among their children and they are generous in tailoring their demands for more mature behaviors to the temperaments and abilities of each UNIQUE child.

PARENTS ARE TEACHERS

Every child needs a caring parent to be a TEACHER as well as a nurturer. Parents are the best teachers of VALUES in a family. If parents face their own problems by screaming and lashing out, children will learn that way to cope. If parents struggle to keep a family organized and functioning with few financial resources, if they cherish children through hard times and good, their children will learn courage (Honig, 1982a).

Children's empathy flows from experiencing their own parent's empathic response to their early fears and emotional upsets. The empathic parent who in addition firmly rejects a child's use of hurting others within the first two years of life will have a child more likely to tune in to other children's hurts and needs (Pines,1979).

Parents Prime the Pump of Learning

How does a parent become the first, best teacher who ensures the child's early learning success? Varied are the programs that have been developed to teach parents how best to help their children learn. Some involve parents in groups together. Some programs invite parents as aides into classrooms. Some programs provide Home Visitation in order to promote parenting skills (see Honig, 1979 for an in-depth description of parent involvement programs).

Respect for the child is the foundation of good teaching. As parents notice early skills just emerging, they **scaffold, support, and lure** the child to a slightly more difficult accomplishment, to a slightly more subtle level of understanding, to a somewhat higher and more mature level of skill. I have called this technique "Dancing developmental ladders of learning" (Honig, 1982b). In each area of learning, the parent takes CUES from the child: Is the baby making new babbling sounds? Talk more with baby. Read books and point to pictures. Label objects, and express genuine interest in what the baby seems to be trying to communicate. Turn-taking-talk primes language learning (Honig, 1985a).

Is your child trying to feed herself? Provide Cheerios on the high chair tray to facilitate thumb and forefinger precise pincer prehension. Is your five-year old asking questions about where babies come from? Be an askable parent and provide simple, short calm explanations that are compatible with the understanding of this child (Gordon, 1983).

Preparations ahead of time boost the effectiveness of parent efforts to prime new learnings, to scaffold opportunities for learning. Provide lots of discarded paper and crayons for children to draw. Take them on small outdoor walks and to parks often to give them opportunities to learn to swing, climb, balance, and coordinate their bodies with ease and grace.

Parents with limited financial resources need to scout their living space to use every opportunity to turn a household chore or routine into a learning experience. Store-bought toys may be too expensive, but parent creativity can make every homey experience into a learning adventure (See Honig, 1982b for ideas that work). Laundry time can be used to teach colors, shapes, comparative sizes, and the names for different materials and garments. Baking time is a wonderful opportunity to increase hand dexterity skills in rolling, kneading, shaping, and measuring. And the tastes afterward are an extra reward for the helping youngster.

Grocery shopping is a superb learning experience for young children. Meat, dairy and fruit/vegetable departments give children opportunities to form conceptual categories. Where would hamburger be found? What items will need refrigeration? Which cartons or cans are heavier ? As children grow and learn about numbers and

letters, many take pride in being able to find a nutritious cereal box by the special letter on the box. They like to help stuff a plastic bag with string beans for supper. When money is in short supply, a child learns early that food and rent come first. Money for extras such as toys must be carefully budgeted. The real world of shopping, cooking, clean-up times, and yard work provides rich opportunities for learning about number, shape, color, weight, bulk, categories of objects (such as animals or furniture) and other cognitive concepts.

DISCIPLINE IDEAS FOR PARENTS

All parents, not just parents with limited resources, need help to learn discipline techniques beyond the dreary " hit" and "scold" many folks learn in their families of origin. Every parent needs a large repertoire of techniques to use at different ages and stages of a child's growing up. Parents who were raised by being belted and whipped sometimes have powerful urges to use physical punishment. They hated the type of discipline they received but often believe it was justified. They need support to learn more appropriate child management skills.

Research has shown that severe physical punishment was the major discipline method of parents whose youngsters ended up convicted of juvenile crimes. And, the worst crimes were committed by the youngsters who had received the most severe physical punishments! (Welsh, 1976).

Let us cull from professionals useful ideas about discipline and some positive discipline techniques that parents CAN use in order to raise responsible and cooperative children without instilling fear and deep anger against parental power

(Briggs, 1975 ; Honig, 1985b; Crary,1990; Gordon, 1975; Lickona,1983).

1. Take a developmental perspective. Punishing a two-year-old for a toileting accident when that particular child may not be ready to give up diapers for another year shows a lack of awareness of developmental norms for sphincter control. Male children have higher rates of enuresis and may need particular understanding from parents who want compliance with their toilet training efforts (Honig, 1993).

Expecting a newly cruising- about baby not to touch breakables or garbage in a bag left on a floor is more than the young toddler is capable of managing (Honig & Wittmer, 1990). Parents who learn more realistic expectations of young children's development can better understand how and when to discipline, and best of all, how to prevent discipline problems from arising. Preschoolers love to get all muddy and splash in puddles. They did not "mean" to cause more laundry work for a parent. Beware the dangers of **Projecting Evil** onto young children. Parental rage is too often fueled in abuse cases by the adult's feeling that a small child deliberately set out to "hurt" or "defy" the adult rather than just act as young children do act - often messy, sometimes in short supply of inner controls, sometimes needing to dawdle or say "No". Professionals must help parents gain more realistic understandings of young children's growth. Projecting evil onto children is a danger that often leads to violence and inappropriate discipline.

2. Offer choices. Toddlers who are contrary will often settle more easily into cooperation if offered a choice:" Do you want apple juice or orange juice? " Do you want me to read this story book or that one for a bedtime story?"

3. Decide who owns the problem. A child who dawdles in the mornings so long that she misses the school bus owns her problem. If a baby tears plant leaves from a favorite plant left on a low ledge, the parent owns the problem. If a parent expects a child with learning disabilities to do as well in school as an older brother who got high grades, the parent owns the problem, and the parent's strong disapproval rather than support may contribute to possible school failure, and low child self esteem.

4. Think through household rules. Have few and clear house rules and be sure there are good reasons for the rules. Drinking milk is not a "must". A child can get calcium and Vitamin A from yellow cheese and from yoghurt. But not hurting a sibling IS a must in a family. Make sure young children really know your rules. Ask a child who is not following a rule of the family to repeat to you what the household rule was. If the child is confused, he may not be aware of his "misbehavior" and may well need to have the rules re-explained and the reasons for them." "I don't need to wash my hands for supper 'cause they are clean" may mean that the child needs to learn more about germs and the importance of keeping safe from sickness.

5. You cannot ignore when children harm others. Ignoring misbehavior only works for minor infractions. If a child hurts another, for example, and the parent ignores this, the undesirable actions will not decrease but continue. Be firm about not allowing children to hurt others, but express that firmness without modeling physical hurt yourself.

6. Respect your child as a person with a viewpoint of his or her own. A child is not personal property like furniture! Don't make comparisons that make one child feel unloved, unpretty, or untalented compared with another.

7. Require reasons from your child. Sometimes young children give amusing reasons, such as " I should get four cookies because I am four." "I should go first because I am bigger." As children grow, let them know that you expect them to think through reasons for how they are choosing to act. Adults have to help young children learn how to reason and to think causally and sequentially. By asking children for reasons without putting them down, we can encourage them to think more clearly.

8. Offer appropriate incentives: " After you clean up your room we can play a game of checkers."

9. Introduce the language of fairness into your talks with children in their play with peers or siblings: "Each child needs to get a turn. Every child in the game needs to play by the same rules. Games will end up in fighting and they will not be fun if children do not follow the rules." Still, fairness may not always work. If one child has disabilities or is ill, then that child may need special attention and care. Children have to learn about **equity as well as fairness. Equity means taking into account special needs at special times for each person.**

10. Remember that fantasy and truth are not the same for preschoolers as for adults. Children have such strong longings and beliefs in fantasy characters that they sometimes have trouble distinguishing reality from their own wishes. A six-year old reported that she was a terrific swimmer, when she could barely take a few strokes in

the water. In Menotti's Christmas opera about the three Wise Men, "Amahl and the night visitors", the boy Amahl tells his mother excitedly that he has seen a star with a tail as long as the sky. Parents may need to ask their children: "Is that a true-true story or a true-false one?"

11.Find your children's gifts. Sometimes a parent wants a child to be a terrific ball player because that was the parent's secret desire as a child. Or parents are so anxious about a child doing well in science that they do not realize that this child is talented in art but not as gifted for science. Learn the gifts of each child.The child who doodles a lot in class may be showing a budding gift for cartooning or drawing, not just a difficulty in concentrating in a particular classroom. Children whose parents ignore their gifts and push other agendas on them may start to lie and even to cheat on tests in school. Be aware of when your child needs tutoring in school. But also learn to appreciate the gifts your children do have.

12. Use empathic listening to reflect the genuine feelings of your child if he is upset. Ridicule, put-downs, impatience - these are the swords that drive deep into children's hearts to make them feel that adults do not care about their feelings. Listen to your child's problems. Listen and try to express your understanding of the child's upset feelings even when you do not agree with the scenario or think he is being childish. Finding his playmate prefers a neighbor child and he has no one to play with seems as serious to a preschooler as adult problems seem to a parent.

13. Be available and truly interested in talking with your children. Give them your full attention. Children hunger for parental attention. If parents are too involved in

their own needs, children will sometimes steal coins out of pockets to fill up their empty feelings. Children have deep **emotional hunger** for focused parental attention.

14. Use Bibliotherapy. Stories have a wonderful power to heal. Children identify with the loyal elephant in Dr. Seuss' "Horton hears a who" or the mischievous cat in the " Cat in the hat". Every neighborhood library has good books about children's troubles. If you are going through a troubled time in your family, such as loss of a grandparent, living with an alcoholic family member, or suffering through a separation, read books to help your child identify with a story child who has lived through such a problem and has managed to cope despite sorrow and worries.

15. Help children make a plan. If your child wants you to take him to the park to play with some friends later in the day, make a plan together. Think out loud together with your child. She can finish her homework first and read her little brother a picture-book story while you get dinner ready early so that you can take the time off to go to the park with the children.

16. Don't denigrate the child's other parent. In separations and divorce, parental bitterness and resentment belong to the adult, but sometimes spill over onto the children. Parental anger should not be sent as a sword through the body of a child where there has been a separation or divorce. Professionals need to help parents work through rage and grief so that these sorrowful poisons do not afflict children unduly. Already, young children in divorce often feel that it was their fault. Parents who feel betrayed or abandoned sometimes try to turn a child to hate the other parent. When possible, children need to feel that they are still loved by the other

parent. In particular, when mothers raise children alone, they may not realize that fathers are very precious to children (Biller & Meredith, 1975). Fathers are the preferred playmates of babies and their loss can cause long-lasting distress for children. Try to promote a climate of surety about each parent's caring for the children even when the parents cannot live with each other.

17. Encourage excellence, not perfection. Expect children to try hard. They know they can never be perfect and may deliberately fail or act clumsy if they feel you expect perfection. Praise good trying.

18. Make up stories to reassure scared children. If your child has terrors or fears, for example, about starting kindergarten, make up stories about a little child (who very much resembles your child) who had a similar problem and how a healing, reassuring, good ending happened in that situation (Brett, 1986).

19. Tattling and reporting important news are different. Make a distinction to your children between 1) tattling to hurt a sibling to get even or as one way to show jealousy, and 2) the importance of telling information to parents if there is a really important trouble where an adult must get involved.

20. Assign chores depending on the age and ability of each child. Give children a feeling they are important, contributing members of your family. They feel useful and helpful. "I am a big helper. Papa needs me to hold the nails and hand him a nail as he repairs the ripped screens." Swan & Stavros (1973) found that required helpfulness (not coerced, but required) proved an important characteristic of low-income families where children were successful as kindergarten learners and in their

social relationships with peers. They noted that low-income families with self-motivated learners had neat living environments, read daily to their young children, ate meals together and talked together at dinner time, and found their children genuinely interesting persons.

21. Try to figure out what is worrying your child or angering her that might cause a misbehavior. Understanding the reason may help you find a way to reassure children so they feel more secure and do not have to act out their resentments or disappointments. Children misbehave when they want more attention. They act out to feel powerful or exact revenge (for example, because they were really humiliated or because they feel displaced in parental affections, as when a new baby is born or a parent remarries and devotes little time to the child).

Be careful about "causes". Some children who are drug addicted in the womb will show unmotivated aggressive actions. Secure loving environments with clearly structured firm rules help children learn controls even when children's motives are obscure.

22. Help children consider the consequences of their actions. If Johnny fights with Billy over a toy, you may send Billy home and then Johnny will have nobody to play with the rest of the rainy weekend afternoon. Kids need encouragement to THINK - out loud- about what might happen IF they act in a certain way.

23. Challenge children to think up alternatives to fighting. Encourage children to think up other ways of handling their social conflicts besides "not playing " with another child, or "hitting him". The more that children are encouraged to think up

alternative solutions to their problems the more likely they have been found to solve their social problems more appropriately (Shure & Spivack, 1978).

24. Express your personal pleasure with each of your children. Tell a child that you love him, that you love her. Hug your child frequently. Caress a child with warm (rather than cold or disapproving) voice tones. Shine your eyes at a child so that the sunshine of your smile and the pleasure in your tone of voice warm the deepest corners of your child's self.

25.Use victim-centered discipline talk in helping your children understand how others feel if they are attacked or hurt. Describe how a punch or a nasty word hurts another's body and feelings. Galvanize your child to feel how it would be if the hurt had been done to him or her. Be firm in not accepting hurting as a means for your child to solve social conflicts.

26.Talk about peer pressure with your children. Peer pressure is very powerful in coercing some children to misbehave. Sometimes peer pressure to have special sneakers or clothes or possessions will lead to children's stealing another's prized clothing item to gain peer admiration. For a family with limited means, peer pressure must be confronted. Family values and family circumstances can be accepted IF the child feels a strong sense of rootedness and reassurance from the family rather than from the peer group.

27. Shame is an acid that corrodes the soul. Shame is often twinned with rage that fuels serious misbehavior. Do not shame your children or they may well feel that they need to get revenge on you. Perhaps a child acts defiant just to show that you

cannot really make him eat a food he detests, you cannot make him fall asleep. To get even, he will lie awake angry for hours. It is dangerous to play power and revenge games. They destroy a child's feelings of security and trust in parents.

27. Encourage competence even in young children. Let them try, even if they are not expert to accomplish tasks they are capable of doing, such as putting on a coat, or setting a table or pouring out dog food into the bowl on the floor. Children who give up easily or feel that they can never do their homework, never learn to ride a bike , for example, are **discouraged** children. Try patiently to support their small accomplishments. By expecting too much, too fast, we sometimes force children to act incompetent to get out from under the disapproval they feel will be inevitable if they aren't superior (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1982). Be a good **matchmaker**. Make the tasks you expect ones that the child CAN do. Encourage efforts and tries.

28. Work alongside a young child. When a job seems overwhelming to a young child, make sure you work alongside. "Clean up your room" may send a child into a temper tantrum or into trying to avoid the job entirely. But if you tackle the task cheerfully together, the child will enjoy your company and feel pride in his hard work together with you.

29. Find ways to give yourself a lift. Parents who feel happier with their own lives discipline more effectively and can share their happiness with children. Something as simple and inexpensive as a long bubble bath may relax an adult. Cleanup help after dinner from a partner helps an parent feel appreciated. In a family with limited material resources, enlist imagination rather than material objects in order to bring

special highlights into the family's day and into life. When rainy days in a row have resulted in short tempers, plan to serve supper as a picnic on the living room floor. Let the children help make sandwiches. They spread the tuna salad and peanut butter on bread slices and wrap each sandwich. Place all the picnic fixings in a basket and pretend you are walking to the picnic grounds, an old green sheet spread on the floor. Pretend games can break into the crankiness or sameness of daily living where severe financial constraints do not permit entertainments that "cost money". Professionals need to introduce parents and help them feel comfortable in the world of the free public library, in a "Please Touch" museum, in a drop-in store front center that welcomes families with respite child care, opportunities to swap children's used clothing and shopping coupons, as well as providing parenting classes and guitar lessons.

Making collages out of bits of plastic egg cartons and other collected throw-aways can brighten an afternoon and provide art decorations to display on a refrigerator door so that children feel how proud you are of their talents.

30. Galvanize help when parents are behaving in seriously dysfunctional ways with children. Stresses can unnerve and make life difficult for parents. The five kinds of abuse are: physical abuse; sexual abuse, physical neglect; emotional hostility; and emotional unavailability. Sometimes counseling and insight from child development experts can help. In urgent cases, when legal systems are threatening to remove a child from a home, then more strenuous professional help, such as Homebuilders provides (Kinney, Haapala, & Booth, 1991), may be required. Homebuilders is an

emergency service whereby a caseworker spends a great many hours for about six weeks in the home teaching the family members Gordon's (1975) Active Listening and I-statement techniques so that they can manage their severe difficulties and get along more positively.

Conclusions

Parent involvement must become a priority goal in improving children's lives and learning careers. As we support parents, particularly parents whose lives include undue stress from limited resources, we will be ensuring a brighter future not only for the families and children served but for our entire society.

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